

Online Student Engagement of At-Risk Students During a Pandemic: A Reflective Essay

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Abstract: The importance of reflection in teaching has been advocated to address complex decisions that teachers make. This has been heightened by many complexities of the environment within which academics navigate and was highlighted more in the recent Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. There is a dearth of publications that address the reflections of academic staff members and the support programmes for students at risk within the accounting field in higher education. This is coupled with a lack of focus on academic support interventions. The objective of this reflective essay is to describe the decisions of higher education academics in an accounting department in their quest to provide a multi-pronged academic support programme (ASP) to undergraduate students identified as at risk during a pandemic. The essay reflects on three components of the actions of the teachers: academic support, peer mentorship, soft skills and work readiness workshops. The essay uses an integrated reflective cycle model by considering the experience of planning and delivery of the ASP and Schon's reflective approach by outlining reflection-in-action and reflections-on-action and recommendations for preparation for future ASPs. This essay contributes to the much-needed reflection of higher education's response to the lockdown relating to teaching and learning and adds to the body of knowledge on approaches to support interventions for students identified to be at risk in the accounting field and the need for accounting academics to reflect on their pedagogy.

Keywords: Students success, Remote teaching, Reflective practice, Students at risk

1. Introduction

The higher education sector has previously been marred by various challenges from inequality brought on by increased access post the apartheid era, protests on fees, the decolonisation debate (Motala & Menon, 2020), and most recently the complexity of sustainability during a pandemic (Toquero, 2020). The importance of higher education graduation rates and the factors that influence them are widely researched (Talbert, 2012; Cabrera, 2014; Clarke, 2020). However, universities are still grappling with low progression rates. To address this, the university has been exploring models to implement interventions that would improve the success rates. This, in turn, could increase graduation rates (Mizikaci, 2006). The formulation of interventions often includes the identification of students who may be at risk of failing a module, giving extra classes, and additional formative assessments. It is usually a fragmented approach that does not consider the full qualification that the student is enrolled for nor other facets relating to personal growth and socialisation within the higher

education environment. Anecdotal evidence noted low student motivation and engagement during the semester and the authors developed a support programme that would not only address academic interventions but also peer mentorship, soft skills and work readiness skills.

The enforcement of the lockdown meant that the academic programme needed to be delivered remotely as higher education institutions contained on-campus risk (Motala & Menon, 2020). The pandemic posed a drastic risk not only to the academic year but also introduced an additional challenge to interventions that would support module performance. This essay presents a reflection of two authors who are academics (senior lecturers) in a university in Johannesburg, South Africa. They were part of the management team in an academic accountancy department offering an undergraduate diploma programme. They were involved in implementing the Academic Support Program (ASP) programme for students in the second and third years of study. As coordinators, co-problem solvers and co-implementers provided an opportunity to

reflect on the programme implementation strategy during COVID-19 drawing from the lived experience of actions taken and plans that were developed for the successful delivery of a programme during a national disaster (Motala & Menon, 2020). This was the first year that a ASP, focused solely on academic support and student's academic success and progression for all registered modules and not bursaries, was offered in the department.

The paper aims to detail the reflections on the experience in a remote learning environment during a pandemic by academics in the accounting field. It describes how the challenges experienced on implementation were managed, including student engagement, administration, communication and the use of technology applications for the programme's rollout. The essay also presents successes and opportunities that were evident at the time of implementation.

This paper contributes to the much-needed reflection by academics in higher education and a response to the lockdown relating to teaching and learning (T&L) remotely (Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020) and adds to the body of knowledge on approaches to support interventions for accounting students identified to be at risk. The objective of the paper is to reflect on the experience of two academics in an accounting department on the delivery of ASP during the pandemic. The sub-objectives are:

- To reflect on the decisions and actions taken in the programmes' implementation process (reflection in action) and a reflection post the completion of the programme (reflection on action).
- To describe the ASP's multiple-pronged interventions that were developed as an approach to improve student learning and the academic's facilitation of the learning process.

The structure of the essay is as follows: Section 2 outlines the literature on academic success and the theoretical framework; Section 3 presents the methodology applied in the reflection process; Section 4 discusses the co-authors' experience of reflection-in-action during the ASP's planning and implementation; Section 5 presents reflections-on-action post the ASP's implementation; Section 6 concludes with recommendations for areas of future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Student Success and Challenges in Higher Education

Obtaining a higher education qualification is viewed as an opportunity to enhance socioeconomic mobility and reduce inequality (Reinders, Dekker & Falisse, 2020). It is no longer enough to increase access and enrolment into higher education, but interventions have become important to ensure that enrolled students eventually graduate (Bettinger & Long, 2004; Castleman & Long, 2013). Additionally, first-generation Black students face a variety of difficulties that impede their social and economic success. This is consequently one aspect that contributes to universities' poor success rates (Ramos, 2019). The programme sort to provide support to disadvantaged students defined as students whose demographic description includes low-income, non-white, working-class, or first-generation college students. These students are often faced with barriers in higher education, including financial barriers, lack of academic preparation, lack of information and behavioural barriers (Herbaut & Geven, 2019). COVID-19 introduced a new barrier that had not been anticipated.

Illeris (2006) suggests a student's ability to learn and perform is an intricate process that is impacted by cognitive, socio, emotional factors and prior experience. Identifying at-risk students promptly as well as personalisation and adaptation of the learning process is important to improve a student's performance (Siemens & Long, 2011). Seminal work by Astin (1984) and Tinto (1975) argue that various factors affect a student's academic success. Characteristics that contribute to academic performance can help identify students who need further support and assistance to create programmes that address their issues (Carpenter & Roos, 2020). Astin's Input-Environmental-Outcome (I-E-O) allows researchers to examine the impact that environmental inputs have on outcomes taking into consideration background characteristics. Understanding these environmental factors requires consideration of the institutional environment to assist students in transitioning into higher education and facilitating social and academic assimilation (Carpenter & Roos, 2020). Tinto (1975) highlighted the student's attributes and how academic development is influenced by their involvement in university life. The student's success can also be affected by their satisfaction with student-faculty interactions (Zhou & Cole, 2017).

2.2 Interventions

Multiple interventions have been explored to support students in higher education to improve engagement and increase student success rates. To aid reflection a review of literature relating to academic interventions, mentorship, skills and work readiness was conducted and is discussed below.

2.2.1 Academic Interventions

Winkelmes, Bernacki, Butler, Zochowski, Golanics, and Weavil (2016) developed an uncomplicated yet replicable academic intervention focused on first-generation, low-income and under-represented students. First-generation students are 51% less likely to graduate in 4 years (Ishitani, 2006). Universities have tried to implement interventions to increase student success for at-risk and previously disadvantaged students. However, few studies show what faculties can do to jointly address the success of underserved and at-risk students (Winkelmes *et al.*, 2016). The authors found a direct relationship between increasing a student's academic confidence and sense of belonging and student success, especially for underserved students. Furthermore, it was found that the above led to diminished racial success gaps, insecurity and increased student confidence and increased the likelihood of being in the top 25% (Walton & Cohen, 2011). This was done by creating transparently designed, problem-centred take-home assignments because they were replicable, and improved academic confidence, sense of belonging and awareness thus increasing student success (Winkelmes *et al.*, 2016). This led to increased student engagement in lectures, more timely completion of assignments and few mark disputes (Winkelmes *et al.*, 2016).

2.2.2 Mentorship

Mentorship is a progressive relationship that fosters learning, socialization, guidance and career development for individuals who are cultivating a knowledge base. It is an intervention that can, directly and indirectly, improve academic outcomes and persistence in higher education (Lunsford, Crisp, Dolan & Wuetherick, 2017). Mentors can build connections that mould a student's personal and professional growth and can inspire their mentees to follow their goals and assist with fostering resilience in tertiary education. Regular communication between the mentor and mentee has favorable effects, such as giving mentees the impression that they matter and can succeed in their academic endeavors (Ramos, 2019).

Mentorship programmes often have three categories: undergraduate research, peer mentoring or comprehensive mentorship (Lunsford *et al.*, 2017). Peer mentorship was used for the programme. It focuses on enhancing the students' sense of belonging, academic persistence, and success (Jacobi, 1991; Hill & Reddy, 2007). This was a framing intervention that focused on challenges that students may face by helping them to be more adaptable (Harackiewicz & Priniski, 2018) facilitated by their peers.

2.2.3 Soft-Skills Training

Kermis & Kermis (2010) stated that soft skills incorporate written, verbal, presentation and interpersonal competencies. Accounting students are required to attain technical competence, harness social and emotional intelligence and soft skills in the form of communication, critical thinking and ethics (Golemon, Boyatzis & McKee, 2004; Rebele & St Pierre, 2019). The International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) requires the application of principles as opposed to compliance with rules. This requires accountants to poses dominant soft skills (Kermis & Kermis, 2010). However, Leone (2008) asserts that grasping soft skills such as critical thinking, judgement, integrity and analysis is one of the more challenging factors over and above technical training. Bay and McKeage (2006) posit that there may be deliberate academic interventions to heighten students' emotional intelligence.

2.3 Theoretical Framework Underpinning Reflection

Reflection is a conscience examination of past experiences, focusing on thoughts and ways of doing things to learn about oneself and a situation to inform the present and the future. It can therefore inform decisions, actions, attitudes, beliefs and understanding (Edinburg University, n.d.). Reflection is used in various educational and professional settings, especially in teacher education, psychology and science-related fields such as nursing. It forms part of pedagogical action research to improve student learning through systematically investigating one's T&L as a student and as a facilitator of learning to inform modifications to practice and inform theory (Norton, 2009). Considering the factors that affect student outcomes, the importance of academics reflecting on their practice and contributions to student success is heightened under the environment of remote teaching that took place in higher education. The importance of reflection

is highlighted in educational literature as well as practitioners' and researchers' development (Johns & Freshwater, 1998; Mayes, 2001; Trelfa, 2005).

Mortari (2015) presents four perspectives on reflection: the pragmatic view, the critical perspective, hermeneutic perspective and the phenomenological perspective. The co-authors specifically adopted Schon's (1983) approach to a reflection which distinguishes between "reflection-in-action" and reflection-on-action". The stages of reflection-in-action require reflection as something is happening; consideration of the situation, the decision on how to act and acting immediately. The stages of reflection-on-action require reflection after something has happened; reconsidering the situation, thinking about what needs to change in the future.

The coordinators used the theory of pragmatic reflection because it not only frames reflection as an intellectual exercise but also as being action orientated to problem-solve for the advancement of life (Mortari, 2015). The authors reflected on their experience of implementing the programme to increase the effectiveness of future programmes geared towards the academic support of students at risk (Dewey, 1923; Mortari, 2015). This perspective was fitting as the uncertainty of the impact of the pandemic on education fits the assumption that "thinking occurs when things are uncertain or doubtful or problematic" (Dewey, 1916:83).

Concepts of reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983) are presented where decisions about action were being made during implementation and due to the unforeseen event of having to implement the programme remotely rather than in a face-to-face environment. This method is ideal in instances where there are no standard procedures or answers to deal with problematic situations (Mortari, 2015). The other concept of reflection-on-action (recollective reflection) allows for thinking on what has already been done, to consider our actions and how they contributed to the solution of the problem (Schon, 1987). The authors will reflect on the actions taken at the time of delivery of the programme and whether the support provided considered the factors as identified by literature to improve academic success.

3. Method and Process of Reflection

An integrative reflection model was used for the reflection that is inspired by a range of models

including Gibbs reflective cycle and Schons approach to reflection. This is a qualitative approach to research that focuses on reflection on the experience of implementing programme (Edinburg University, n.d.). The essay was written from the academics' experiences at the time of remote T&L during a pandemic. They have been involved in FtF support programmes, pre-pandemic and blended learning. Thus, this offers a snapshot of how they navigated uncharted terrain not only to save the academic year but to save the programme as well. In applying the integrative model, the authors' views are subjective based on their experience and perspective on the programme. The tools used to aid the reflection were the review of meetings held throughout the programme, notebooks used to document challenges and decisions taken, memory recollection and review of student feedback through emails and mentor reports to identify themes.

A limitation is the authors could not fully capture their experiences of the implementation of the programme remotely. Albeit their reflections represent a cognitive activity, they would not be able to recall the full object of their thoughts at the time, but only what their reflection has been able to retain. For them to have a complete awareness of their thoughts and selves, they would have had to observe themselves outside of themselves, which is impossible (Mortari, 2015).

4. Reflection-in-Action

4.1 Context and Consideration of the Situation

Lockdowns forced the university to institute remote learning in all T&L activities (Motala & Menon, 2020). This prompted a rethink of the original strategy of an FtF ASP being delivered remotely not as a conscious decision but rather propelled by extenuating circumstances. The coordinators adopted a strategy that had been implemented for interventions on a previous year's bursary programme for academically strong students. This programme encompassed academic support, mentorship, soft-skills and work-readiness workshops. The bursary programme demonstrated that a student's academic performance improves if a student has adequate academic and non-academic support. Therefore the coordinators adopted the same approach for this ASP.

The 162 students who participated were identified through self-selection through an open recruitment

process that was announced on the learning management system (LMS) as it was accessible and convenient. A pre-requisite was that the students on the programme be South African citizens and preference was given to African black and coloured students and students with disabilities where possible to address transformation. The programme was opened to 2nd and 3rd students identified as being at risk. These were students who were repeating the prior year's modules and needed additional assistance to obtain their qualifications. First-year students were excluded because there was no historical information about their higher education academic performance. 63% of the students were in their final year of study. 99% of the students were African Black and 64% were female. 64% of the students originated from urban areas; Gauteng (58%), Limpopo (15%) and Mpumalanga (10%) (see Figure 1).

85% of the students' fees were funded by the National Student Funding Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Despite students being funded by NSFAS, there is still a need to provide them with academic and non-academic support because of their socio-economic and historical background to ensure the educational playing field is leveled.

4.2 Academic Interventions

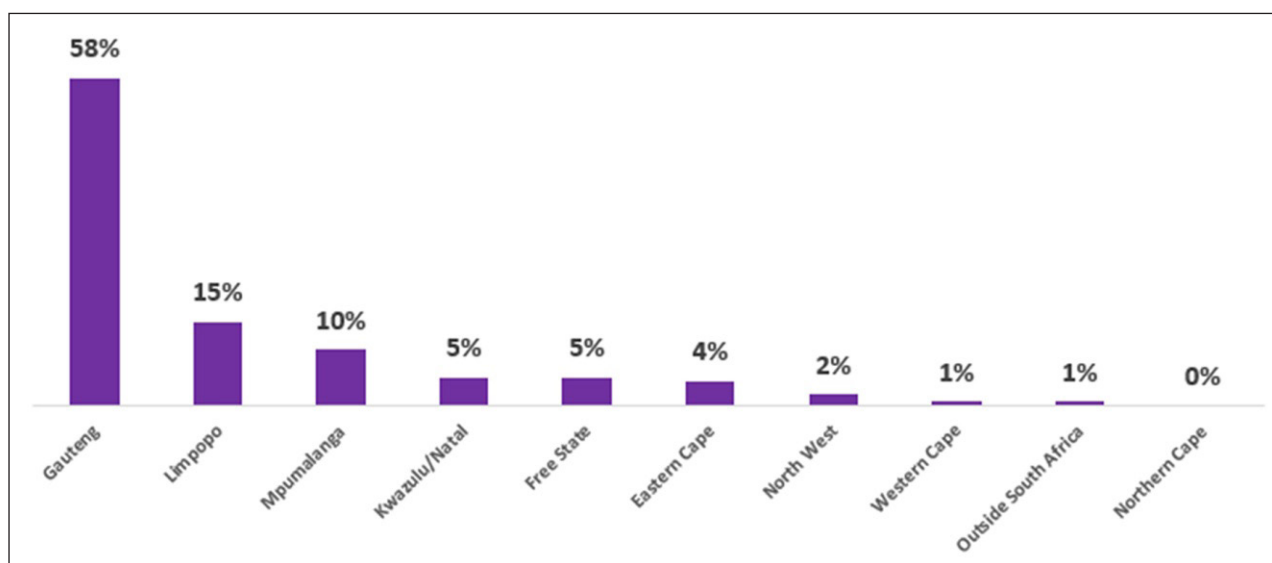
The academic part of the programme was a course-specific, task-value intervention that focused

on academic content (Harackiewicz & Priniski, 2018). The coordinators wanted to create a safe, confidence-building and enabling learning environment for the students because students experiencing academic challenges might have low self-esteem and may become reclusive if the programme did not cater to their needs (Winkelmes *et al.*, 2016). The coordinators considered the students' input regarding academic needs, timetables and preferred lecturers to encourage attendance and participation. Two additional weekly lectures were scheduled, per year-group during the semester and revision lectures towards the end of the semester. The frequency of these lectures ensured students engaged with the content continuously. Students received a question a week before the lecture to attempt on their own and submitted on the LMS. The purpose of the additional lectures was not to reteach the material taught but to determine a student's understanding of the principles taught in an application-type question.

4.3 Mentorship

The coordinators, through their experience, knew some students struggle academically not because they lack the knowledge required for the module but rather due to non-academic problems. Peer mentors would have experienced these challenges themselves (Lunsford *et al.*, 2017). There was an application process for potential mentors.

Figure 1: Origin of Students per Province



Source: Authors

Preference was given to applicants who were alumni, or studied an accounting qualification. This was to ensure that mentors would be able to relate to and understand challenges the mentee faces. It was to motivate the mentee if they have a mentor who went through and succeeded in obtaining the qualification they are enrolled for. Thus focusing on enhancing the student's sense of belonging, academic persistence, and success (Jacobi, 1991; Hill & Reddy, 2007).

It was crucial for mentors to get formal training. Therefore, mentors were trained at the inception of the programme, facilitated by the institution's academic development unit to ensure that they were adequately equipped to engage with their mentee, be cognizant of the challenges the mentee may face and develop mechanisms to address these challenges (Lunsford *et al.*, 2017). All students were allocated a mentor to provide one-on-one support and referral for professional intervention when needed. This aimed to enhance social and academic integration. Peer mentors submitted weekly reports on their engagements with students to assist in the identification of problem areas that required further interventions, beyond academics.

4.4 Soft-Skills and Work-Readiness Workshops

For the program to be balanced, the coordinators thought it was necessary to include a component that helped students develop their soft skills as well as other training that would improve their readiness for the workplace, give them a competitive edge when looking for suitable job opportunities, and help them transition smoothly into a working environment. Additionally, students couldn't ignore intangibles like a strong work ethic, a sense of urgency, and a desire to help others as ways to show dedication to their studies. To address the gaps identified in the literature on workplace readiness, the coordinators approached a consulting firm that focused on personal and career development. The coordinators highlighted that they preferred the workshops to consider the following aspects:

- Different socialization and parenting styles exist in South African homes.
- Diverse cultural dynamics may disadvantage students in the workplace.
- A corporate environment that is widely diverse in terms of race, culture, age and sexuality.

- Emphasis on self as a product that is of value to society and business based on the ability to contribute in terms of time, character, skills and qualifications.

It was intended for FtF seminars to be presented on campus so that the facilitator could get to know the students and develop a rapport with them since an outside provider, not a person the students were familiar with, would deliver these lessons. Students and the life coach would have discussed topics in groups while the facilitators could have participated.

4.5 The Decision on How to Act: Pivoting Because of the Pandemic

4.5.1 Academic Intervention

The programme was planned to be delivered FtF. However, the pandemic needed the coordinators to pivot and rethink how the programme could be successfully delivered remotely. The coordinators swiftly developed a strategy to deliver the programme through remote learning under difficult and unprecedented times, to ensure students' academic goals are achieved.

Groups per year of study were set up on the university's LMS as a central point of communication and uploading material. Students were engaged both through asynchronous, pre-recorded videos and synchronous lectures held virtually. Based on students' timetables, Fridays were the most suitable day for the academic interventions.

Questions were uploaded on the LMS for students to attempt a week before the synchronous online lecture. Academics prepared comprehensive, pre-recorded videos explaining the solution to the question. This recording was shared with students to reflect on their understanding after they submitted their attempts, to mark their answers and to prepare questions they may have before the live lecture on Friday. During the synchronous online lecture, students were allowed to ask questions. These lectures were recorded to allow students with data and/or device constraints to access the material afterwards and use the material in preparation for major assessments.

4.5.2 Mentoring

The coordinators felt it necessary for students to have frequent communication with their mentors to build a connection, trust and constructive

engagement instead of ad-hoc interaction. The original plan was FtF weekly meetings of mentors with their mentees. However, all sessions were virtual using platforms best preferred by both parties such as WhatsApp. Students on the programme shared email feedback that their mentors were very crucial in their academic progress because the mentor provided non-academic support to cope with academic progress. Students found that their mentor could relate to some, if not most, of their challenges because they had walked a similar path in recent years. Therefore, the support and advice shared by the mentor were based on previous experience and embodied empathy.

4.5.3 Soft-Skills and Work-Readiness Workshops

The services provided included ten custom-made, pre-recorded videos developed for the students by a life coach. Numerous topics were covered, ranging from character development, preparing for a virtual interview, social media behaviour, diversity awareness and professionalism. Furthermore, there were four webinars to flesh out the content covered in the videos. This was an eight-week programme and all the content was made available to students for future reference.

4.5.4 General Student Engagement

The programme team gave the students virtual support by creating WhatsApps group per year to create a community for all the students. The team shared daily motivational quotes and shared voice notes/videos created by the team to discuss specific topics such as exam techniques for remote learning. Overall, the success rate of students on this programme in 2020 was 81%. This is based on students who were either promoted to the next academic year (44%) or who obtained their qualification (56%).

5. Reflection-on-Action

5.1 Reconsidering the Situation

When the lockdown was implemented at the inception of the programme, the coordinators were faced with two options, to relook the strategy of the delivery of the programme remotely or to withdraw the programme. On reflection, the latter was not an option. Students needed greater help because they were more at risk - not simply as F2F at-risk students, but also because the pandemic and the uncertainty it caused threatened both their health and chance to get a higher education credential. These students

required additional support and continuous monitoring of their performance to navigate the remote environment.

The coordinators felt the remote implementation of the programme created more opportunities to reach at-risk students as a whole than there would have been with a silo approach of modules; addressing qualification success rates rather than just module success rates. It also allowed for the provision of support not only to students who have been identified to be at risk academically but the ability to record the sessions and share them widely with all students.

5.2 What Needs to Change in the Future

5.2.1 Academic Intervention

The challenge of delay in the awarding of the programme funding is likely to result in a delayed programme start date making it difficult to align to the university academic calendar. However, there is an opportunity to offer additional classes during the June/July recess for those students who may need to prepare for supplementary exams. Despite this obstacle, coordinators feel that additional revision sessions before supplementary examinations will help students enhance their chances of passing a supplementary exam.

Forty-one per cent (41%) of the successful students in 2020's were in their second year. For future programmes, preference will be awarded to the 41% who were promoted to the next academic year as they demonstrated that the programme was beneficial to them and that they would like to continue being beneficiaries of the programme.

5.2.2 Mentorship

Mentorship in this programme is deemed a pivotal and crucial element. Therefore, the recruitment of mentors remains essential. Previous beneficiaries of the programme will be encouraged to apply as a way of 'paying it forward'. The coordinators believe their experience as mentees will add to the common factors to build relationships.

Weekly meetings (physical or virtual) will be required as part of the programme. However, more F2F engagement will be encouraged. Training programs may be designed to help mentors assess their mentee's needs. Sanford (1962) suggests that a mentor should strike a balance between challenge and

support for constructive growth to emerge and avoid excessive support because students can become heavily reliant on their mentors to resolve their problems. Failing which students might be overcome by too many challenges (Jones & Abes, 2011)

5.2.3 Soft-Skills and Work-Readiness Workshops

The presentation of pre-recorded soft skills videos did not allow for the desired group interaction or interaction with the life coach. This was a costly constraint of pre-recording instead of F2F or synchronous sessions which would have allowed for live engagement and practice of some of the soft skills that were being modelled. The students were exposed to non-technical or non-discipline related information and life skills, such as diversity awareness, that will be useful to them when they enter the working environment. Despite the soft-skills and work readiness webinars taking place after three pre-recorded topics, this remained an important part of the program. The students were exposed to non-technical or non-discipline related information and life skills, such as diversity awareness, that will be useful to them when they enter the working environment. Despite the soft-skills and work readiness webinars taking place after three pre-recorded topics, this remained an important part of the program. These sessions demonstrated the importance of well-balanced and well-rounded graduates.

Two additional opportunities exist in the future; to include 4IR-related content to introduce and prepare the students for the skills that are the most sort after in the 4IR era and sessions on financial literacy (Ramos, 2019) and how to manage finances as students and when they start employment.

5.2.4 General Student Engagement

The tutors on the programme remain pivotal to the running of the programme. This is because they are the interface between the coordinators and students. The team will continue to use WhatsApp per year-group as a mode of communication and to share daily motivations with students.

6. Recommendation and Conclusions

The dawn of democracy increased access to previously marginalised groups to access higher education. However, the difference in socio-economic backgrounds and quality of secondary education has resulted in stark differences in the performance

of students and required a differentiated approach by universities to provide support where gaps have been identified. This programme has the potential to contribute towards the 4th SDG goal of ensuring inclusivity and equitable quality of education. The soft-skills and work readiness introduce students to the importance of life-long learning outside of accounting technical knowledge.

Accounting academics and students had to adjust to the varying T&L issues brought about by the pandemic (Sangster, Stoner & Flood, 2020) and there is an opportunity to chart a research agenda for accounting education that evaluates a blended approach (Sangster *et al.*, 2020). Even though COVID-19 appeared to put the programme on hold, it encouraged the coordinators to be innovative. The recorded sessions allowed the students to revisit the material at their convenience. It also allowed for greater access to all students in that the recorded sessions were shared with students who were not part of the programme, allowing for learning opportunities for all. This however does not necessarily address the new threat to equality and access brought on by COVID-19 evident in the differences in access relating to adequate devices, data and network infrastructure (Motala & Menon, 2020) which was not addressed. The reflections above made the coordinators realise there was indeed a method in the process applied to implement the programme under crisis mode.

Considering the potential benefits of such a programme and the fact that it was the first time it was implemented, it is recommended that accounting academics should apply reflective practices to the interventions put in place to support accounting students in higher education. The reflection has allowed the co-authors to reflect on their practice and pedagogy concerning T&L innovations, student engagement and coordination of a programme. Research, supported by literature, will improve their academic rigour in supporting students with T&L.

The reflective practice helped the coordinators improve their strategy and track how these programmes affect performance. The reflections also provide evidence of programme delivery that can be shared beyond the quantitative performance of students, but also qualitatively and programme implementation characteristics that could potentially be shared amongst institutions. This programme has been conducted at a point in time. Longitudinal

research as new similar programmes are implemented presents more opportunity for reflection. Future reflections should include perspectives of students, tutors and peer mentors.

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